

Jumbo-Visma: Rising From the Ashes

If any WorldTour team has ridden a roller-coaster of fortune over the past few years, that team would have to be Jumbo-Visma. Formerly known as Rabobank, the team has long the pride and joy of the cycling-crazy Dutch fans, but it ran into a storm of financial, doping and sponsorship problems in 2010 and 2011. With several of its riders accused of or admitted to doping problems, and following the October, 2012 USADA Armstrong report, [Rabobank abruptly pulled out](#), saying “We are no longer convinced that the international professional world of cycling can make this a clean and fair sport.” Remarkably, the firm wanted out so bad that it had its name removed from the team’s jerseys, even though contractually it continued to fund the team for another year. Riding for awhile as the no-name “Team Blanco” and even after the team was able to attract the U.S. electronics firm Belkin as a sponsor for parts of two years, the once-proud organization really hit rock-bottom in 2015 – winning just five races all year, firmly positioning it at the bottom of the WorldTour.

Cut and pan to today. The team has 40 victories so far this year, with more than a quarter of the season remaining. It bagged 33 victories last year. Star GC man Primož Roglič challenged for victory in the Giro, until fading in the last few days, ultimately finishing in 3rd place. Teammate Stephen Kruijswijk – with an impressive support team led by Laurens de Plus and George Bennett – challenged Team Ineos throughout the Tour and ended up on the podium, while the team took an impressive four stage wins. Roglič finished 4th last year, and Kruijswijk also made a strong run for victory in the 2016 Giro, until crashing out on Stage 19 and ending up 4th. Sprinter Dylan Groenewegen burst onto the scene last year, taking two stages at the Tour, grabbing another this year, and powering the squad to victory in the Team Time Trial. The team boasts an impressive list of other proven and up-and-coming riders including German strongman Tony Martin, perennial GC contender Robert Gesink, and young Dutch breakout star Wout van Aert. And reportedly, the potential cherry on top of this cake is the recent signing of Dutch icon and former Giro winner Tom Dumoulin a few weeks ago. While it may still be a bit premature, Jumbo-Visma certainly seems headed for cycling’s loosely-defined “super-team” category.

So what changed, how to explain the improving fortunes of the team? Much of the credit must go to team director and owner Richard Plugge, who stepped into the middle of the mess in 2012, and who has directed the gradual rebuilding and reestablishment of the team over the past seven years. Hired by Rabobank in April of 2012 to be the team’s press and communications director, it was only six months later that the former journalist and editor was thrust into overall management of the team, just as Rabobank exited and the team entered some of its darkest days. Plugge has clearly done an admirable job at reinventing the organization, but the most remarkable aspect of Jumbo-Visma’s turnaround – and one that heralds some key lessons for the sport – is that the team has been able to accomplish all this with one of the smallest budgets in the WorldTour.

The Outer Line recently chatted with Plugge to discuss the turnaround at the team, and the key factors behind its recent success. Although he declined to discuss specific numbers, Plugge confirmed that – according to the UCI budget rankings provided to the teams – Jumbo-Visma ranks somewhere around number 16 or 17 out of the 18 WorldTour teams. So we were obviously curious about how Plugge and his colleagues have been able to rebuild the team to the level of success it enjoys today with one of the smallest budgets in the peloton.

It clearly hasn’t been an easy path. “From the beginning of 2013, this was essentially my team,” says Plugge, “and during those first two years, it really wasn’t about how to win races or run a team, it was about survival.” The team was objectively the worst squad in pro cycling, and it badly needed a new sponsor. Plugge was able to find Belkin, which gave the team some respite, but the Belkin sponsorship didn’t last long either. “During that timeframe,” says Plugge, “there was real turmoil and unrest on the team. Things were not comfortable, no one knew if we would even be there next year. To be honest, during 2013 and 2014 the situation within the team was sort of chaos.” But Plugge also believes that “out

of chaos came the opportunity to create a new organization, and to build a new culture.”

Plugge says that the turning point came in 2015, when the Dutch supermarket chain Jumbo signed on as the new sponsor. “Jumbo told me, ‘we will either sponsor or we won’t sponsor. But if we do sponsor, we are going to roll up our sleeves, we are going to be involved, and we’re in for the long haul.’ That gave us the breathing room we needed, and in 2015 we really began to work on creating a new DNA – a new culture – for the team.” With this financial commitment behind the team, Plugge says, “that’s really when the reorganization began. We were still a bit trying just to survive, but it was in 2015 when I sat down with Merijn Zeeman, Nico Verhoeven, Mathieu Heijboer and some of my other guys, and we began to ask – how can we run as a successful team, how can we manage as a successful business?”

Raymond Kerckhoffs of *De Telegraaf*, dean of the Dutch cycling journalists, has been reporting on the team for decades. “Every stone was turned over,” he says, “whether it was staff, scouting, training, food or equipment. The question was asked – how can each part be improved.”

Plugge continues, “What is maybe different about our team is that we first started to define and build a real strong DNA – to define who are we, to ask what are our core values, what is the culture we are trying to build? We try to define and discuss that with everyone, before we hire them – riders or staff; we try to make sure that person fits with our DNA.” To support the roster of 27 riders, the team employs a staff of almost 70 – a strong and extensive support group, bigger than most other pro squads. Plugge admits that “sometimes we make a mistake, but we’ve been fortunate to make some good decisions as well. Some people began to realize they didn’t fit here, so they left, or in some cases I had to help them leave. But we made it clear – if you want to work with us, you have to behave like the culture we have started.” Says Katholieke Universiteit of Leuven economist (“Professor Cyclocross”) Dr. Daam Van Reeth, “Richard Plugge is viewed as one of the only team managers with a true long-term strategy.”

In the intervening years, Plugge and his team have created the sort of culture or environment which has allowed many riders to perform at, or even above their full potential. Riders like Roglic and Groenewegen have been big discoveries, and have performed far better than many other teams had originally assumed. “We’re just trying to create the best environment for our riders,” says Plugge. That kind of success is infectious, and as the team has started to achieve bigger results and turn heads, more riders have expressed interest in joining the team.

When quizzed about the significance of the national identity of the team however, Plugge downplays the Dutch legacy aspect. “Yes, we are a Dutch team, but we are not just about Dutch riders – we are about bicycle riders. We have German riders, we have American, Belgian, Slovenian, Kiwi riders. But he also adds, “Yes, perhaps some of our culture is reflective of the Dutch people or habits – Dutch people tell it like it is. They can be very direct, maybe some would say rude or not so polite. But what people here really mean is – this is the problem we have, and now let’s solve it. So no, our team is not about Dutch riders, it about all riders. “

And Plugge emphasizes that his key sponsors are not just the money behind the team, they are also an integral part of the day-to-day management and planning for the overall organization. “My sponsors are very interested in the team, and they are available to me 24 hours a day. I have almost daily contact with Jumbo’s CFO Ton van Veen and businessman Robert van der Wallen. Bianchi is very helpful with the equipment and technology innovation, and likewise, the Visma boss is also very involved with cycling, always wanting to help.” Within the team’s limited budget,” Plugge says, “we are putting a lot of money towards the science behind innovative racing; the money is not all going into rider contracts.”

Beyond the scope of his own team, Plugge also draws attention to a couple of broader issues and challenges that he feels the overall sport must address. “My one major issue is that the calendar is just too big, and it’s not comprehensible to the fans. I would just go with maybe 100 or 110 racing days in the

WorldTour, then your stars could race more or less all the races. The current 180 days – it's impossible to see Dylan, or Peter Sagan or the other big stars in every big race. I would shorten the calendar, and make a really strong second-tier calendar. To maintain fans, we should be able to see the big guys in every race. In the Champions League, all the big stars play in every game – the fans know that, and they follow all the games. And we really need to create more fans for cycling.”

Plugge also suggests that teams and race organizers have to work more closely together, instead of frequently fighting against one another. “We need to increase the size of the cycling ‘pie’ so that everyone can have a bigger piece. And we also need a better sharing of the income of cycling – by creating more money and sharing the extra, we can create a more stable ecology for the sport. I would really like to see the teams trying to work more closely with ASO.”

In contrast to some of his compatriots, Plugge prefers to let his actions do the talking – and he projects an understated and modest outlook for the team’s future. “Yes, of course we have been twice on a Grand Tour podium this year, but we still have not won a Grand Tour, or a Monument. We are still not an Ineos or a DeCeuninck-QuickStep. We still want to get to a higher level, and step by step we are getting closer to our objective.” Plugge clearly takes a very deliberate approach, focused on accomplishing a discrete and measured strategy. “Most important to me is that we move towards our objectives in our own way, gradually. A series of small steps have to come first, and then bigger steps will follow naturally.” With the team that Jumbo-Visma [just announced](#) for the Vuelta, the team may be closer than ever to that primary objective.

This recent history of Jumbo-Visma presents a valuable lesson or parable for many of the organizational and financial challenges facing pro cycling. What’s the main takeaway here? Plugge wasn’t a bike racer; he came from a more general business background – and he has approached the building of a team from a business perspective. In other words, put together a strategy and a vision for the organization, start to create the right kind of culture, focus on putting the right people in the right places, and begin to move gradually towards your objective. As the organization builds momentum, it starts to become self-sustaining; more people will take notice of your success and message, more people will want to join the organization. Plugge has built his team just like one would build any other type of professional organization or business – with a focus on the fundamentals. Maybe it’s not rocket science, but it’s something that a lot of other teams would do well to mimic.

By Steve Maxwell, August 21st, 2019.